

Every house has a door
Two films from *The Carnival of the Animals*
ESS Quarantine Concerts event Zoom script
March 13th, 2021

First array of 4: Matthew, Lin, Christine, Essi

Matthew:

Thank you Olivia, and hello and thank you everyone. My name is Matthew Goulish, and I am the dramaturg for *Every house has a door*. I am here with director Lin Hixson, lighting designer and technical mastermind Christine Shallenberg, and collaborative costume and textile artist Essi Kausalainen who joins us from Helsinki, Finland. Together we will introduce our two short films for you. After collaborating with Essi on our performance project *Scarecrow*, we realized that we had not exhausted our mutual interests in human-non-human relations, that those concerns still had plans for us. We commenced a multi-part performance project titled *The Carnival of the Animals*. We envisioned a series of modular performance works following the 14-movement structure of Camille Saint-Saëns's 1886 musical suite for children. We would devise an original performance in response to each of Saint-Saëns's titles, following those imaginative classifications. Essi's handmade costumes would supply the visual and material common vocabulary, and co-conceive each performance. The intricacies of non-human life would provide the foundation. We imagine these performances as elliptical in shape, with two unequal centers that differ in kind, one center the human, and the other the non-human, with the performer working in the middle space of connection.

Lin:

On March 11th, 2020, exactly one year ago this week, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, and we indefinitely postponed our performance plans. Somehow Matthew and I had the idea to convert the garage of our house into a makeshift film studio, so that I could direct short film versions of the Carnival performances. With the blessing of our co-owners, we cleaned out this large space and prepared it as best we could. We would keep the garage door open for air circulation, reducing the risk to the performers and crew. I was particularly drawn to the strange visual backdrop of one wall, which one of the house's many previous owners had covered with siding of faux brick that one

never sees anymore. We had finished work on our performance *Aquarium*, but had not yet premiered it. Now we adapted parts of it to film, with the actors of the international cast who were available in Chicago. I had to reconfigure the work to include the camera as a concept and as an element, in ways that I will talk about after you see the films. I am grateful for the cinematography team of Yoni Goldstein and Hadley Austin for helping us to realize the *Aquarium* film. For this film, distinct from its incarnation as a performance, we added an element of song, commissioning Madeleine Aguilar to adapt a portion of a poem by Chicago poet and former marine biologist Ed Roberson, who had given us his permission to work with his words. The second film, *Characters with Long Ears*, we conceived originally and entirely as a film. The cinematography team of Julia Pello and David Hall helped us to realize this project, for which we included Julia's young son Isaac as performer and narrator.

Christine:

In using the garage studio as our site for the filming, we were presented with some challenges and opportunities in regards to lighting and weather. For *Aquarium*, we installed film and theatrical lighting equipment throughout the garage space to create the feeling of the play of light under water, while still maintaining a relatively even light level. We used fans to play with the layered materials of the costumes, suggesting the movement of creatures off camera. In *Characters with Long Ears*, we used the film lighting equipment to shift between cool and warm tones to suggest various times of day. We also worked with the natural light from the sun through the open garage door as it became available to us.

Essi:

The textiles created for the Carnival of the Animals invite the performers to explore their human - more-than-human bodies, and the audience to connect with these sometimes unimaginable forms of life. They operate as a soft stage, a protective shield, a prosthetics for re-imagining our beings and others'.

The fabric of these endangered bodies and habitats is a complex one. Like all bodies are hybrids of their own cellular composition and their environments, the costumes combine different textures and fibers. Organic plant materials are sewn together with synthetic ones. The indigestible plastic in the belly of the fish.

The shapes are based on specific creatures as well as their human performers. They are based on a process of observation. Instead of mimicking or replicating the designated creatures, the costumes create a space for being-with.

In *Aquarium* the costumes offer the performers their primary habitat, a private space for a very intimate investigation. In *Characters with Long Ears*, the Ears made for the video operate as prosthetics, as amplifiers. While they play with the shape and visuals of animal ears, they have a very functional role: they are a tuning tool for the performer, a prosthetics for listening with the whole body. As amplifiers they magnify this small scale performance for the viewer to see, to connect with.

Matthew:

We will screen both films with no intermission—*Aquarium* 13 and 1/2 minutes, and *Characters with Long Ears* 12 minutes—and then we will return to speak about our processes, along with several members of the collaborative team. Please note that both films feature long periods of silence, and the first film has no sound at all for the first almost ten minutes.

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Second array of 9: Matthew, Lin, Essi, Elise, Alex, Bryan, Sky, Madeleine, Sarah

Matthew:

Hello again and thank you, or for anybody who missed the beginning, I'm Matthew Goulish, *Every house has a door* dramaturg. We have prepared some statements for you now about our films. We will hear from Lin Hixson, the director, Essi Kausalainen, textile and costume artist, Elise Cowin, performer, Alex Bradley Cohen, performer, Bryan Saner, performer, Sky Cubacub, performer, Madeleine Aguilar, musician, Sarah Skaggs, producer, and I will return to close the program at the end. I want to emphasize that those terms for people's roles are all shorthand and entirely inadequate in describing the actual ways in which everyone contributed to the devising and actualization of these works. I believe you will get some sense of that actuality from everyone's statements now.

Lin:

I direct performances but all of a sudden during the pandemic, I was directing, along with the performers, a machine, a camera with a frame, with a performance in it. In the first film, *Aquarium*, the camera was on a tripod in the middle of a garage in front of a post. It rotated five times from one side of the garage to the other side, each time 180 degrees or a half circle. The film was one continuous shot that lasted twelve minutes and twenty-three seconds. Each sweep was approximately two minutes. Yoni (Goldstein) controlled the camera movement by hand on the tripod with Hadley (Austin) calling time so he knew where he was in each of the two minutes. In the live performance of *Aquarium* we thought a lot about pressure, how to exert it on the performance like the glass of a glass tank. I was also interested in this pressure in the film with the camera's predetermined relentless movement.

We thought of the second film as a series of five portraits like portrait paintings in time framing *Characters with Long Ears* that were listening to sounds outside of human range. For me, the portraits evolved into landscapes of moving ears, heads, eyes, shoulders, and textiles. Here I was seeking Ma with the camera, the Japanese concept of negative space — not in reference to literal negative space in the frame but in relation to the perception of the emptiness, the emptiness that rested outside of the frame in the wind, in the night, and in the light of day.

Essi:

How to approach a creature? Someone you have never met, who's world you cannot comprehend, who's body and senses operate with completely different vocabulary and scale from yours? Or someone you didn't even consider as a creature - such as Limestone.

When entering the Textile Discount Outlet in Chicago, my shopping list might say: two Kangaroos, the Elephant, Hens and Rooster. The list is an invitation for the materials to address me. Although I might have an idea what a kangaroo looks like, the fabrics help me to see in a different way.

My understanding of the Eyelash Seaweed grows by stitching 15 meters of tangling fringe into a five meters long tunnel of cotton and by lining that tunnel

with polyester. By creating ripples and folds in light weight synthetic membrane and seeing these folds animated by Elise's body. By watching the movement they create in Elise and in me, in muscle and in emotion.

The process is informed by scientific articles, online video clips, the performers bodies as well as the materials themselves. Not to mention Lin's directives and Matthew's writing. The textile habitats and prosthetics are created from the point where the imagined body of a seaweed, the width of a human hair, and the body of Elise in wave like movement meet. They are a documentation of a dialogue, of bodies coming together in absence and presence.

Elise:

My friend the dog has long, limp ears that hang below his jowls. Compared to pointy-ear companions, floppy ears indicate a dog more driven by scent than hearing. Even with his drooping ears, my friend the dog perceives sound with such sensitivity that it's hard for me to comprehend. When he listens, the delicate flaps lift up and away from his head as invisible armatures fold them into unlikely shapes. My friend the dog listens so determinedly that he stops breathing. I watch his ears take over while the rest of his body seems to forget –paw lifted mid-stride, chest still, eyes cast without seeing. Then, suddenly, his ears relax, chest swells with air, and eyes click into focus as he bounds forward.

Observing my friend the dog, I find myself asking similar questions as I do when performing. Whether a dog attuning his body to a sound or a dancer responding to a choreographic stimulus, how does one task end and another begin? How does the whole body listen? How can my human sense of time bump up against dog time and other nonhuman durations? I considered such questions through choreographing and performing *Aquarium* and *Characters with Long Ears*.

For *Aquarium*, I responded to one of the oldest plants in the ocean (a type of vegetation humans call Eyelash Seaweed for its tiny size the length and width of a human eyelash). No one has seen Eyelash Seaweed since a 2016 earthquake disrupted the boulders on which it tended to cling. Scientists wonder if Eyelash Seaweed continues to exist. I thought through some of these details choreographically –first, in a kind of stuck-ness, in which part of my body clings to the ground while the rest is moved as if by a current, as well as attention to the small: the palms of my hands, shapes of my fingers, breath in my chest, path of my eyes.

How to approach time was more perplexing. *One of the oldest plants in the ocean unseen since 2016*... The choreography I offered Lin was stubbornly slow, significantly slower than I would usually choose to perform. I am searching for a mode that resists my usual, lived time. While performing, I think about moving through two parallel tasks. There's the task of executing the sequence of movements, which feels familiar to me as a dancer. I know how it ends. But there's also an undercurrent: a languid yet persistent press of time that rolls this sequence forward. The latter feels unfamiliar, like I can't see its whole shape.

For *Characters with Long Ears*, I read up on the Eastern Meadowlark, a type of New World Blackbird. I learned that some birds' ears are offset with one sitting higher than the other. Sometimes listening is about locating the sound one hears. My friend the dog trots on a curious diagonal, one ear encountering what's up ahead and the other checking for what might be following. The Eastern Meadowlark tilts its head. Watching footage of the Meadowlark and thinking of my friend the dog, I tried to acknowledge this process of listening and locating in my choreography. I am a point in a network of noise.

In performance, the task of listening creates a virtuosity of attention. I am interested in what razor focus does to presence and the body. I am half aware of my suspended hands and body below my ears. My eyes drift in and out of seeing. For a moment, the task of listening makes me forget that I am with other people and a camera.

The performer recedes.

The human steps back.

Alex:

As I prepare for this writing a car has been honking endlessly for the last 4-5 minutes. (I can hear it out my window).

My mind is a little spacey and I'm trying to enclose myself and gather my thoughts, so that I can begin remembering the past. My past as limestone, my past as exclamatory paradise whydah. (I believe that my mind will try and conflate the two. I will let this happen.)

What I begin to remember is the anxiety of feeling unprepared. Not due to a fear of lack of my own abilities but a fear associated with not knowing how to place my body; not only within my character but in relationship to the bodies of others.

I would say that what I was experiencing was Disorientation. Mainly associated to moments outside of character. The character itself was the only place that I experienced actual presence. I contribute this to the stage, the environment, and the permission to be elsewhere.

Away from COVID. Away from audience. Totally integrated elsewhere.

Bryan:

I think about my performance as essential to my survival.
If I stop moving I will die.

In the *Aquarium* video you saw today I perform as a Lesser Electric Ray. This is an aquatic creature that measures about 8 inches in diameter with a tail that makes it about 18” long. It produces a small electric shock that it uses for defense. The particular movement I performed was inspired by a video of an electric ray fighting with a squid.

In *Characters With Long Ears* I performed as a Bat. Lin sent me some slow motion research videos of a bat trying to catch some food using echolocation. The discovery in this experiment was that the bat wags its head to increase its ability to hear the echo.

I think of these performances as shamanistic rituals or collaborations with the spirits of these animals. Humans animating the animal, while also celebrating the human shape.

Like the enchantments of our ancestral hunters wearing animal skins and dancing animal moves to envision the kill or to ensure fertility so our people would survive.

In *Every House Has a Door*, we are performers wearing ocean-creature costumes and long-eared headdresses, and moving to document the possible extinction of those creatures so our people will survive. Because we are intricately connected to these creatures.

We are all nearing extinction.
If we stop moving we will die.
How we survive depends on how we act and what we perform.
These performances are also about joy and gratitude for this life and the earth.
These movements are acts of faith.
Will these videos help those creatures and us?

We're witnessing a point in time before we leave and the future continues.
Staying awake is more important than knowing the signs.

Sky:

I have been taking a weekly pay-what-you-can mime class that my friend and collaborator Dean Evans (also known as Honeybuns) has been teaching since quarantine started, so I was very excited when my prompt that Lin gave me for *Characters with Long Ears* was of the flamingo mating ritual dance because I instantly saw a lot of skills that I could draw from the mime classes. The quick head movements of the flamingos were really fun to do with my oversized ears. I was also directed by Lin to dart my eyes around which is one of the mime exercises I have been doing at Mime Online. She liked in our Zoom rehearsal how sometimes when I would hear the sounds I would move my head very slightly as if I heard it and then was straining to hear again.

All of the ears are exquisite. The different shapes and the lightness of the materials (I love the use of the rip stop) along with the cute tiny bits of fringe that accentuate the movement of your head. I liked that my ears were like giant Mickey Mouse ears, very dramatic.

Lin and Matthew are always very caring which is why I always work with them when they ask me to! This was one of the only in person projects that I have participated in during the pandemic, but everything was planned so well to be as safe as possible, being outdoors, but also caring about my comfort very much and providing so many space heaters! They all are so positive and give very nice generous feedback. I always feel like a star and like they really value me as a person, artist and performer.

Madeleine:

My name is Madeleine Aguilar, I'm an interdisciplinary artist and musician, and I composed the song at the end of the film *Aquarium*. Songwriting is the way I process experience and tell stories. In my practice, I've used the form of the song or the concept album to recount the life of Joan of Arc, to catalog every state I passed on a 7 week road trip, and in response to each unit of a quantum physics course. I tend to work improvisationally and intuitively throughout the process, allowing the song to emerge as I'm recording it, adding new layers of rhythm and melody, each in response to the last. Over time, the melody evolves through playing, listening, recording, erasing, and reworking. The process can take anywhere from 2 weeks to 2 months.

At the start of this project, I was given the gift of Ed Roberson's words excerpted from his poem "Word of Navigational Challenges", a short clip of Alex Bradley Cohen dressed as the Limestone testing out the movement of the costume, and the time constraint of 2ish minutes to fit the length of the shot. I responded immediately to the poem, it was full of life and movement, but also had a stillness and silence to it. There were a few words and phrases that struck me, "an echo", "its breath curling", "it can't sit still". I had been playing this one riff on the guitar for a while without having any words to put it to, so I started there. In response to the poem, I experimented with echo. I liked how the space between the strumming pattern allowed for the reverberation of the other instruments to linger in those spaces. I was also thinking about the costume itself, the beauty of its design, but also the slight delay between the movement of the body and the movement of each individual piece of fabric. The percussive elements were a direct response to the costume, I think I was imagining the sounds of the creature. Lastly, in composing the song, I hoped to reflect the sense of gentle wonder that Roberson's words invoked for me. "The sea/ Has always had/ Its peace/ Through shell to say/ How much/ Each wave ending/ A zero more/ It can't sit still". I felt the tumult of the waves and the continual motion of the water. But in the midst of it, there was a peace and a stillness, which brought me comfort. It was an honor to sing these words and a joy to work on this project.

Sarah:

Looking back on it now it doesn't seem that complicated, but at the time the idea of developing protocols that would allow us to come together in the same space and make performance seemed impossible. I love these folks more than you know,

and to be responsible with crafting the permissions for engagement felt really scary. I think if I had been working on my own, I wouldn't have done it. I would have just waited and would still be waiting. But Lin had this deep desire to keep working and a sense of urgency that inspired *me* to get to work and overcome my own fear and grief.

I started researching what other people were doing and got help from the filmmakers of the *Aquarium* piece (Yoni Goldstein and Hadley Austin), then thought out loud with Lin and Matthew. I looked at what conditions the CDC's contact tracing protocols used when delineating an encounter with a person as a 'contact' and reverse engineered our plans. The thinking was that if anyone on set found out afterward that they were sick or had been in contact with someone that was sick, the physical encounters on the set would be so light you could hardly consider each other as exposed. "Make it safer than going to the grocery store" was a mantra in my head.

[Image of Lin and Isaac on the set.]

The amazing thing is Lin took this and incorporated it into the choreography and direction for each of the performers. There was never a need for enforcing distancing, for example, it was baked into the movement through the space. Or our fans to help with air circulation also do the work of bringing the objects and costumes to life. In hindsight I understand now that part of what made it feel so easy was the culture on which our protocols were laid over.

[Image off. Return to grid of 9.]

I spend a lot of time (and I know Lin and Matthew do as well) thinking about what it feels like to work with *Every house has a door*. I want for the time and space of rehearsal, the invitation, the compensation, and the response to ideas to leave our collaborators feeling as though they are deeply valued individuals and always have permission to ask for what they need. I realized that when one feels entitled to and has space for addressing their needs; when there is permission to ask, permission to say no, and the expectation that what you bring is enough, that the energy you have is enough – when all of that is already in place – it lends naturally to the communication and mutual accountability required for our Covid-19 protocols to work. Since we were already focused on keeping each other healthy, in every sense, our protocols just became a new layer that fit comfortably over an already present sense of mutually maintained security.

Matthew:

As a way to conclude this presentation, and to thank the Experimental Sound Studio for all that they do, and specifically for hosting us and the premier of our films, I will make two short statements about the experimental and about sound. If we consider an experiment fixed procedures with unfixed results these films were for us experiments. They taught us what they were as we made them. They revealed themselves to us, and at the center of both of them was sound. We filmed silently, but wanted the silent world, as Jacques Cousteau famously called it, of the ocean's aquarium contained, pressurized as Lin said, in this case in the time of the screen by the bookends of Ed Roberson's poetry, first experienced silently in reading as many movies begin like Star Wars with words on a screen, but then the words in our film would come back, transformed by the time of the aquarium, the events involving the three or four creatures, and by memory, returning as something rich and strange, a song. The silence of the long-eared characters, a silence of an entirely different texture, we thought about as filled with all the sounds that these characters hear that circulate outside of human frequencies, and how we might invoke them, through words and through the faces of the characters who hear them. Isaac, a young person performer, delivered the narration with all of the mystery and majesty of a book report, the way young people do, when we ask: how do they know so much, so much more than we know, we adults? and attuned as he seems be, or anyway to sound when he speaks, to that alternate world that, because it lies outside of our senses, we might mistake for emptiness. As human noise has reduced over the past year, the song of the sparrow has grown quieter, more intimate, and more intricate. The birds no longer need to shout to be heard. How long will this condition last? The sound score that closes our *Characters with Long Ears*, created by Tim Kinsella and Jenny Polus, remained sensitive to these open questions. All of this is to say thank you Experimental Sound Studio for hosting our experiments and our sounds realized in our garage studio. And thank you everyone. No animal was harassed in the making of this program. That concludes our presentation for today.

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